

THE MIDDLEBORO REVOLUTION

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THE overturn of the commission form of government in Middleboro, Missouri, following a protracted quadrilateral deadlock between the executive officers, presents an interesting spectacle in American city government.

The "reform" administration elected in 1920 had been in office three months when the commissioner of finance died. The night of the funeral the remaining four commissioners sat up all night trying to determine which one of them was to inherit the duties of the finance department. No decision was reached. The struggle became so bitter that two members refused to meet the other commissioners, and for a time each group held separate meetings and endeavored to enact ordinances and dispose of the city's business. The mayor and the commissioner of public welfare maintained that they were the legal "commission," while the city attorney ruled that they had no quorum and could not, therefore, be considered "in session for the transaction of business." A few months of this dual government brought matters to such a crisis that the two groups split within themselves and a four-cornered deadlock began. Each commissioner refused to speak to any of the others. Each Tuesday night the mayor, who had seized the gavel, called the empty chairs to order and announced the lack of a quorum and went home.

In April the treasurer, an appointee of the dead commissioner of finance, timidly notified the four commissioners that the funds were about exhausted and that it would be necessary for the commission as a body to authorize certain temporary loans. About the same time the assessor also hinted that the assessment roll was ready to be

confirmed and the tax extensions entered if the commission would only meet to determine the tax rate. By this time the commissioners had developed such mutual hatreds that injunctions, mandamuses, and libel suits made any compromise impossible. On May 8 the city pay rolls were not met and the banks refused to advance funds to any of the commissioners, though a few individual policemen were paid and the downtown fire station was maintained by the chamber of commerce and the bankers' association.

On May 12 a fire in Hillview Park, a better residence section, which the mayor claimed the commissioner of public safety started, consumed three homes before it went out. This brought on the revolution. Without sheets and masks or grand goblins, those who had gathered to watch the fire organized spontaneously and marched to the homes of the four commissioners and literally dragged them to the city hall and held them in their respective chairs. While there had been no further plan than to force the commissioners to resign, someone suggested that the commission be forced to take advantage of the home rule provision of the state law and call an election to vote for a charter-drafting commission. The ordinance was recorded as adopted by the city clerk, and the resignations were also recorded as offered and accepted. The commissioners were made to realize that if they did not sign the minutes "of their own free will" they would be deported.

That ended commission government in Middleboro. The people voted unanimously for charter revision and the leaders of the "revolution" were elected without opposition.